

Managing Public Land in the New York / New Jersey Metropolitan Area



Lady Liberty lifts her torch beside the shore

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Managing public lands into the 21st Century, especially in highly urbanized areas, certainly presents strong challenges but also affords incredible opportunities. The Hackensack Meadowlands and Jamaica Bay (including the Jamaica Bay National Wildlife Refuge, managed by the National Park Service (NPS)) are two of our most impacted and at the same time valuable resources in this area. I would like to offer several perspectives from a Gateway National Recreation Area (Gateway) vantage point. Recently, NPS asked a group of esteemed Americans to look at the NPS park system and provide some direction as the National Parks enter the 21st Century. Their conclusions are as follows: *We are a*

species whose influence on natural systems is profound. Our increased numbers have altered terrestrial and marine systems, strained resources and caused extinction rates never before seen. As developed landscapes press against or surround many parks, pollutants in both the air and water impact park resources. Our growing numbers are drifting away from knowledge about nature and our own history as a nation and a people.

Knowledge gained through education can inspire people to action. Therefore, education is key to the protection and preservation of the Meadowlands and Jamaica Bay. It has equally become apparent that NPS assets can

enhance the quality of public education. The Parks as Classrooms program, developed in the 1990s, set high standards for curriculum-based programs at park sites throughout the NPS.

Gateway is proud of its long history of providing myriad educational programs to adults and students alike. From day-trips along the edges of Jamaica Bay to residential overnights at Sandy Hook and tent camping in the deep dark pines of Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn, rangers and volunteers have introduced thousands of visitors to the wonders of New York and New Jersey parks and preserves.

The Gateway Environmental Study Center opened its doors in January 1976. Since then, it has delivered educational programming and professional development opportunities for over 11,000 students and teachers annually. Future plans include exciting educational opportunities for visitors of all ages and backgrounds. The National Parks of the New York Harbor, a new consortium that represents all of the national parks in our area, will offer several harbor-wide educational programs this year. Some of these educational programs will take place at the new Education Field Station located at Great Kills Park on Staten Island. Additionally, autumn of 2002 hails the opening of a harbor-wide Education Center at Staten Island's Fort Wadsworth. It will eventually offer 70,000 students standards-based educational programs that explore the rich cultural history and natural sciences represented in our national parks.

Education will also expose the need for scientific studies and related research. For example, the Columbia Earth Institute, in collaboration with the NPS, has used Jamaica Bay as the study area for sea level rise impacts on wetlands in this region. Preliminary findings suggest that global climate change impacts will be keenly felt in our bays and wetlands. Gateway also brought together a blue ribbon panel of esteemed scientists and others to help find solutions for the wetland loss at Jamaica Bay, and have continued studying the best way to deal with the shifting sands along the ocean side of the Sandy Hook peninsula.

Together we can do much to curb these impacts. Throughout the NPS, and especially at Gateway's new Jamaica Bay Learning Center for Human Ecology we will be investigating practical things we all can do to minimize the adverse impacts to our environment. We will look at our collective effects on Jamaica Bay and suggest ways to decrease energy consumption, conserve water and reduce pollutants. These and other factors such as land-use planning influence the quality of our lives, the lives of future generations and the long-term health of our coastal ecosystems.

Perhaps the greatest challenge as we enter the 21st century will be effective collaboration between federal, regional, state, and local governments. This will offer an additional mechanism to protect our coastal ecosystems, especially Jamaica Bay and the Hackensack Meadowlands and will be achieved through on-the-ground open space management. Collaboration and sound resource management will help build an outdoor recreation network accessible to all Americans, sustaining and safeguarding our most fragile ecosystems for future generations.



Photographs USFWS / Gene Nieminen



Just miles from Liberty State Park, sound management practices continue to restore more and more of the Meadowlands to better health